

## Borderlands *Letrados*

*La Crónica*, the Mexican Revolution,  
and Transnational Critique  
on the US-Mexico Border

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**Abstract** Angel Rama's concept of the *letrado* refers to Latin American lettered individuals who used writing to consolidate the nation. But what might it have meant to be a *letrado* in the geopolitical context of the US-Mexico border in the early twentieth century, one that combined territorial dispossession, migration, and revolution? This essay examines the contributions of border Mexicans to *La crónica*, an influential Laredo, Texas, newspaper that appeared at least from 1910 to 1914. These "borderlands *letrados*" engaged the Mexican nation from positions of opposition during the Mexican Revolution while contending with Anglo-American nativist imperatives, which shaped their cultivation of an ethnic identity in the United States. Mobilizing the concept of the *letrado* in the context of these borderlands writers makes them legible within larger Latin American currents while elucidating their place at the center of issues encompassing ethnic, national, and transnational concerns.

**Keywords** Mexican Revolution, *letrado*, *La crónica*, US-Mexico border

In her memoir of the Mexican Revolution (1910–20), written during the 1920s and entitled *La rebelde*, Leonor Villegas de Magnón strove to provide a distinct perspective from the one that was already congealing in official versions of the war, one that commemorated a group of politically and socially engaged border Mexicans whose contributions to Mexican history were in danger of erasure: "La historia se ha encargado de relatar los hechos, pero se ha olvidado del importante papel de Laredo, Texas, Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas y otros pueblos fronterizos que en esos momentos se unieron en un fraternal acuerdo" (History has assumed responsibility for documenting the facts, but it has forgotten the important role played by the communities of Laredo, Texas, and Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas and other border cities which united themselves in a fraternal agreement).<sup>1</sup> In speaking about the border region, Magnón often singles out her adopted hometown of Laredo, as she elaborates on the rich intellectual and political culture produced by the city's ethnic

### ENGLISH LANGUAGE NOTES

56:2, October 2018 DOI 10.1215/00138282-6960801  
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Mexicans, especially through their Spanish-language newspapers. She details their active participation in the revolution, both as direct participants in the war and as intellectuals passionate in their belief that their insights should carry weight despite their marginalized positions north of the border. Of particular importance were Nicasio Idar and his children, especially Clemente and Jovita. They published *La crónica*, a weekly newspaper that ran at least from 1910 to 1914 and that stood alongside Los Angeles's *Regeneración* and San Antonio's *La prensa* in terms of circulation and influence.<sup>2</sup> While the Idars provided coverage of worldwide affairs, they focused on Mexico and the local Texas-Mexican border community, devoting great attention to the Mexican Revolution. Alongside Magnón, who also published in the newspaper, they challenged Mexican narratives that either ignored the border region or disdained its people. Refusing to honor the international line as a division, they understood Mexicans in the United States to constitute the continuation of Mexican history north of the border.

Mexicans in the United States were not unified in their responses to the revolution. They were a diverse group marked by differences in key elements of identity formation, such as class, race, and regional background, and comprising an array of subject positions as migrants, immigrants, exiles, and deeply rooted residents who traced their family lines back to when the US Southwest was still the Mexican North. Accordingly, they spanned the political spectrum, ranging from radical anarchists to conservative counterrevolutionists.<sup>3</sup> The Idars and their circle were Tejana/o "progressives," a term used by Benjamin Heber Johnson to describe Tejanas/os who supported the revolution and were active in an array of social justice causes but were more moderate than border anarchists such as Ricardo and Enrique Flores Magón.<sup>4</sup>

*La crónica* challenged modernist imperatives that take as their starting point the hierarchical relations between center and periphery, hierarchies constitutive of Western modernity.<sup>5</sup> In the postrevolutionary Mexican context, such imperatives took the form of an aggressive nation-building project that was predicated on the appropriation of the revolution's meanings through centralization, exclusion, and the drive to achieve modernity and that was shaped through narratives such as the official histories Magnón identifies. The *Crónica* writers did not reject notions of nationhood or modernity; rather, their understanding of the nation was more capacious than the geopolitically defined nation at the heart of Western modernity. They accepted this definition in dealings with the United States, mobilizing it as a basis for their demands for civil and political rights. However, when they used their writings to make demands on Mexico, they did so by mobilizing the nation in a second sense, that of a cultural nation that we now recognize as "Greater Mexico," a term coined by Américo Paredes to refer to "all the areas inhabited by people of Mexican culture—not only within the present limits of the Republic of Mexico but in the US as well—in a cultural rather than a political sense."<sup>6</sup> For these writers, then, the nation was not an "either/or" but a "both/and" proposition: their understanding of nationhood was flexible, and they refused the idea that they could claim membership in only one. Thus they used their writings to engage the Mexican Revolution in ways that grappled with Western modernity's exclusionary imperatives, doing so by foregrounding lived experiences and forms of knowledge from the periphery and,

consequently, by challenging paradigms of social identity as necessarily contained within a unified national culture strictly delimited by political borders.

While *La crónica* and other *fronterizo* newspapers consistently provided sophisticated analysis of the war and weighed in on the Mexican nation's future, they have remained relatively invisible in Mexican and Latin American scholarship. Despite the increasing attention to the revolution's transnational dimensions, this neglect persists even in studies aimed at bringing to light ignored elements of the war.<sup>7</sup> The field that does attend to *fronterizo* newspapers from this period, borderlands studies, has a different blind spot, in that it tends to emphasize the relatively autonomous cultural practices developed by border Mexicans with respect to national centers, and it underexamines the commitment that many of these writers felt toward the ideal of the nation. I suggest addressing these issues by framing the *Crónica* writers through Angel Rama's concept of the "opposition *letrado*." This concept follows from Rama's elaboration of the Latin American *ciudad letrada* (lettered city), which names the nexus of lettered culture, state power, and urban location through which first Iberian monarchs and, later, state bodies imposed order. The *letrados* were an urban lettered elite who used their mastery of and access to the written word to sustain the institutions of the state and consequently maintain their proximity to power.<sup>8</sup> In the final chapter of his book, titled "The City Revolutionized," Rama argues that the cycle of revolutions that took place throughout Latin America in the early twentieth century—including the Mexican Revolution—"unleashed truly transformative forces in successive waves, ever widening the circle of political participation with the inclusion of new social groups."<sup>9</sup> Thus lettered men for the first time had the opportunity to make lives of prestige and power for themselves without having to be part of a governmental bureaucratic machine. Modern *letrados* no longer had to be descended from the "best" families, no longer even had to hail from the city (*LC*, 94). The result was the rise of "opposition *letrados*," lettered men who engaged in intellectual and political activities not only independent of the state but in opposition to it (112).

Rama presents a bleak view of the efficacy of these new *letrados* in challenging the lettered city's totalizing power; their attempts, he argues, were either absorbed by the power structure or simply unequal to the task of "alter[ing] the relationship between power and signification."<sup>10</sup> Ultimately, "opposition *letrados*" is something of a misnomer, as they revert to the position of conventional *letrados*, wittingly or not. Nevertheless, the idea that there was an opening for opposition sheds light on the commitments and strategies of the *fronterizos* that concern me here, while allowing an analysis of the significant ways in which they differed from Rama's *letrados*. The benefit of considering the *Crónica* writers as opposition *letrados* comes in Rama's emphasis on revolution, spatialization, and the nation. Like the opposition *letrados* he identifies, the *Crónica* writers used the technology of the written word to engage the revolution as participants and chroniclers, doing so very consciously from the peripheral spatial positions that explicitly challenged the "centrifugal" force funneling all power to the Mexican center.<sup>11</sup> Yet, and again like Rama's opposition *letrados*, they did so even as they valued the project of the nation itself, for while they actively sought the overthrow of the Mexican government during the rev-

olution, their impassioned opinion pieces charted a course for the nation to follow in anticipation of the war's end. Mobilizing Rama's theorization of the opposition *letrado* in the context of these borderlands writers, then, makes them legible within larger Latin American currents, as Rama argues that similar processes occurred throughout the region. Moreover, for borderlands studies, the concept of the opposition *letrado* directs more emphasis on the importance of the nation.

At this point, however, the *Crónica* writers—whom I conceptualize as borderlands *letrados*—diverge from Rama's paradigm, for reasons stemming from their positions in the geopolitical context of the US-Mexico border. One significant difference is the extent to which women acted as borderlands *letradas*, as suggested by my references to Villegas de Magnón. As Anne Lambright and Elisabeth Guerrero point out, the lettered city belonged to men; the few Latin American women in a position to use the technology of the written word wrote “*against* this lettered city of a privileged few.”<sup>12</sup> Yet women in the borderlands had a long history of creating and shaping print culture in the region. It is difficult to pinpoint exactly why *fronterizas* could access the written word. It is possible that being in a liminal space between nations created opportunities for women to break out of traditional molds, and that the struggles and uncertainties of the revolution accelerated such possibilities. In their writings these women were motivated by many of the same objectives as their male counterparts, but they used distinct discursive strategies that were deemed gender appropriate.<sup>13</sup>

Another divergence is that whereas *letrados* worked to build and consolidate the nation, even if they did so from a position of opposition, those in the borderlands did it in a context that combined territorial dispossession and (im)migration. As such, I understand borderlands *letrados* to engage the Mexican nation in ways that both reflect and shape their positions as subjects of the United States. This has at least two implications. First, because they understood themselves to mark a vital and ongoing aspect of Mexican history, one that they placed at the center of Mexico's national narrative, they were deeply cognizant of the relationship between local conflicts and national projects; in fact, addressing the former often meant framing the problem in terms of the latter. Second, understanding their stories as part of Mexican history meant that they often elaborated on their local situations in terms of a larger context of dispossession, with a resulting emphasis on and critique of the neocolonial relationship between Mexico and the United States. Through their engagements with the nation, then, the Mexican-American *letrados* contributed to Greater Mexico's history as a site of knowledge production, as they elucidated the place of Mexicans in the United States at the center of issues encompassing ethnic, national, and transnational concerns.

### The Santayanas of the Borderlands

In elaborating on his concept of the opposition *letrado*, Rama chooses as his paradigmatic example José Vasconcelos (1881–1959), the Mexican writer, philosopher, and politician regarded as the chief architect of Mexico's postrevolutionary system of mass education, a system that grew out of a vision for nation building that Vasconcelos helped formulate. Rama continually returns to the example of Vasconcelos because of the Mexican thinker's prominent involvement with aspects of the revo-

lution that are central to Rama's conceptualization of the transformations that took place in twentieth-century Latin American politics and culture. Rama argues that the Mexican Revolution was characterized by issues and debates—including those of nationalism and mass education with which Vasconcelos is identified—that would endure throughout the century and from country to country. Thus “the impact of the early revolutions on the lettered city takes on the larger implications of the period as a whole” (*LC*, 100).

Moreover, Vasconcelos came of age in the US-Mexico borderlands and thus exemplifies Rama's contention that the conditions of early twentieth-century Latin America allowed for the emergence of the first *letrados* from outside the capital cities. In making this point about Vasconcelos, Rama acknowledges that the borderlands were important to the revolution and that many of Mexico's most famous *letrados* spent much time there while composing their positions on the war and what it meant for the nation. However, he offers no analysis of the geopolitical specificities of the region and the role they might have played either in the emergence of these *letrados* or in shaping their particular perspectives. Nor does he attend in any way to the importance of those we might call *fronterizos*, or border dwellers, to the story he tells. For while he attaches great significance to the emergence of *letrados* from outside the capital, ultimately his interest is in those who identified with and were oriented toward the Mexican interior.

Vasconcelos was one of these. Born in Oaxaca, he was raised in the border town of Piedras Negras, Coahuila, while attending school in Eagle Pass, Texas, and eventually made his way to Mexico City to attend law school. In the first volume of his memoir, *Ulises criollo* (1935), he recalls with great ambivalence his time in the border region. In a theme familiar in Latin American letters more generally, he lauds the modern accoutrements of life in the United States while bemoaning what he views as the profound lack of spirituality and culture there. Moreover, he asserts that those US qualities have left a deep mark on the areas immediately south of the border as well, so that northern Mexico is unrecognizable to him as part of his homeland. Such themes are implicit when he recalls the hostility he and his Mexican classmates faced in their Texas school, an experience that fostered the nationalist pride that shaped his early writings: “En la frontera se nos había acentuado el prejuicio y el sentido de raza; por combatida y amenazada, por débil y vencida, yo me debía a ella. En suma: dejé pasar la oportunidad de convertirme en filósofo yanqui. ¿Un Santayana de México y Texas?” (In the frontier our sense of prejudice and race pride had been accentuated; because I was embattled and threatened, and because I was weak and defeated, I came into my own. In sum: I let pass the opportunity to convert myself into a Yankee philosopher. A Santayana of Mexico and Texas?).<sup>14</sup> Vasconcelos's brief consideration of a life for himself as a *letrado* of the border is tinged with derision from the outset, as he smirks at his own suggestion that he might have been the Santayana of the borderlands. George Santayana, the early twentieth-century philosopher, literary and cultural critic, and Harvard professor, was born in Madrid and, although he immigrated to the United States at nine, retained his Spanish citizenship throughout his life. That “foreignness” is commonly thought to have informed his pointed commentaries on American culture.<sup>15</sup> It could be that Vasconcelos is making an analogy between Santayana's “out-

sider" position and his own interloper status as a Mexican schoolboy in the Texas borderlands. What is more certain is that he means for the idea that someone akin to the urbane Harvard philosopher would have inhabited the borderlands to strike the reader as ridiculous.

This fleeting moment hints at the long history of disdain with which the Mexican center has held the region. Numerous scholars have noted this view of the Mexican North as a "cultural desert" and, even more, as an untameable zone of rebellion unassimilable into the national body.<sup>16</sup> María Socorro Tabuenca Córdoba notes that the "barbaric" cultural desert in the Mexican imaginary includes the US Southwest along with northern Mexico. She identifies this deeply rooted attitude, "North of the Borderism," as in part the result of a "Mexican centralist necessity to possess a 'national identity' inherited from the nineteenth century. In the wake of the loss of more than half of Mexico's territory, 'national unity' urgently erected a retaining wall of *mexicanidad* (Mexicanness) at the border."<sup>17</sup> North of the Borderism, then, combines a historical disdain of *fronterizos* with an anti-imperial impulse to look inward, to sever the story of the Mexican nation from that of Mexicans who were sacrificed to US imperial expansion.

Vasconcelos had a complicated relationship with the United States and the inhabitants of the border, at times embracing both when it suited him politically.<sup>18</sup> But he largely shared in and propagated North of the Borderism, even expanding its geographic reach, writing in the second volume of his memoir that everything from the northern Mexican environs to New York was a "no man's land of the spirit, a desert of the soul."<sup>19</sup> Vasconcelos eventually left the border region to pursue greatness in the Mexican capital. But what and whom did he leave behind? What if he had stayed in the region to become, in his words, a "yanquí philosopher," focusing his attention on the revolution from the perspective of Mexicans north of the border?

In the same early scene from *Ulises criollo* in which he elaborates on the prejudice he and his fellow Mexicans faced in Texas schools, Vasconcelos provides a tantalizing glimpse of the proto-Mexican-Americans he left behind, those border philosophers who might have become, in his terms, Santayanas of the borderlands. Discussing how the class would naturally divide itself into Anglo versus Mexican students when tense issues such as the Alamo or the US-Mexico War were raised, he clarifies whom he counts as "Mexican": "Al hablar de mexicanos incluyo a muchos que aun viviendo en Texas y teniendo sus padres la ciudadanía, hacían causa común conmigo por razones de sangre. Y si no hubiesen querido era lo mismo, porque los yanquis los mantienen clasificados" (In speaking of Mexicans, I include many who, while living in Texas and with parents who were citizens of the United States, made common cause with me for reasons of blood. And if they had not wanted to, it would not have mattered, for the Yankees classified them as such).<sup>20</sup> This passage elucidates the double outsider status occupied by Mexicans in the United States: the *yanquis* refused to distinguish among Mexicans of different citizenship statuses and with differing relationships to the Mexican nation, lumping them together and treating them with the same prejudice, yet there was a strong awareness of such differences among Mexicans themselves. Vasconcelos's parents worked to keep him oriented southward, where the "authentic" heart of

Mexico resided,<sup>21</sup> and it is clear throughout his memoir that he views these “other” Mexicans either as oddities or as imposters.

However, as the writings of Magnón and others attest, they rejected the idea that they should be discounted as true Mexicans because of their distance from the capital, their proximity to the United States, or their identification with the borderlands. For them, there was nothing problematic, amusing, or inauthentic about their positions either as cultural Mexicans with a profound commitment to the future of the Mexican nation or as members of an emerging ethnic group north of the border. Magnón highlights this very issue in an early draft of her memoir, praising Clemente Idar—one of the *La crónica* contributors I discuss below—for his efforts both in the revolution and in support of Mexican workers established in the United States. She then chastises those Mexicans who viewed the border with contempt, asserting that *fronterizos* such as Idar were “ejemplos de los llamados ‘Pochos’ que tanto desprecian en la capital y que guardan en ambos puños fuertemente apretados el honor y el decoro internacional de una psicología incomprensible y grandiosa” (examples of the so-called Pochos, who are so scorned by the Mexican capital and who guard with tightly held hands the honor and international decorum of an incomprehensible and grand psychology).<sup>22</sup> The term *pochos* was an insult directed at border dwellers to indicate that they were tainted by their proximity to the United States and thus were not “real” Mexicans.

While both the US and Mexican centers saw them as peripheral, Magnón and many other politically active Mexicans of the borderlands understood themselves to mark the continued unfolding of Mexican history in the United States, a point Magnón insistently and repeatedly makes in her memoir. While she could never publish *La rebelde* in her lifetime, she joined other *fronterizos* in employing the Spanish-language newspapers that dotted the border to counter Mexico’s disdain as they plotted a course for the revolution and wrote themselves into Mexican history. This point brings me back to Rama’s idea of the opposition *letrado*. Rama overlooks the significance of the border region to the culture and politics of the revolution, perhaps due to a too narrow focus on national boundaries in his thinking. But his stipulation that *letrados* had to make their way to the city—in this case Mexico City—repeats the omission of border Mexicans from Mexican and more broadly Latin American history that Villegas de Magnón and others fought against. It also neglects the severe political persecution so many opposition *letrados* faced in the Mexican interior, as well as the more constant regulation and censorship of the written word that had always been a hallmark of the lettered city.

While my focus is on how Mexican-American engagements with the revolution shaped Mexican-Americans’ understandings of their positions as subjects of the United States, I want to take a moment to underscore the central role played by Mexicans north of the border in shaping what is now the Mexican literary canon through their newspaper stewardship. Despite generally oppressive living conditions, Mexicans in the United States enjoyed some advantages, chief among them a relative political freedom compared to revolutionaries to the south. As a result, hundreds of novels of the revolution were published in Spanish-language newspapers throughout the US side of the border, including many of the most celebrated.

When one considers the heightened stakes of regulation and persecution in the lettered city during the revolution, in conjunction with the extensive Spanish-language print culture that had developed on the US side of the border and that so many Mexican revolutionaries made use of, it becomes possible to imagine the border region as a locus of oppositional lettered activity of the period. This also suggests that, despite the friction and deeply felt differences of identity between *fronterizos* and Mexicans who were of or oriented toward the interior, these *letrados* worked together to produce a textual culture of opposition, a process largely led by the inhabitants of the borderlands who had developed the necessary infrastructure. One implication of this is that if, as Rama and others have argued, the Mexican Revolution established some of the issues and political currents that would mark Latin America as a whole throughout the century, and if border Mexicans played a significant role as opposition *letrados* in the revolution, then they were important figures in the development of twentieth-century Latin American politics and culture.

### ***La Crónica* and the Borderlands *Letrados***

Having established the importance of these *fronterizos* as opposition *letrados*, I now want to attend to their significance as what I am conceptualizing as “borderlands *letrados*.” Throughout 1910 and 1911 *La crónica* consistently expressed two chief concerns: first, it decried racism against Mexicans in the United States, and second, it supported the political reforms of the Mexican Revolution.<sup>23</sup> As Richard Griswold del Castillo has argued, *La crónica* often explicitly brought the two issues together, such as when it “asserted similarities between Mexican dictator Porfirio Díaz’s corruption and the venality of Anglo-American politicians in Texas.”<sup>24</sup> Such comparisons suggest that the periodical understood Mexican and Mexican-American issues in mutually informing ways and that responding to the revolution also meant responding to situations faced by Mexicans in the United States.

The revolution’s promise gave Mexican-Americans a language through which to press their cases for social justice. For example, in an article dated December 24, 1910, and thus published a mere month after the breakout of the war, Nicasio Idar mobilized the rebellion’s rhetorical commitment to agrarian land reform in his exhortations to *Mexicanos*—by which he meant recent immigrants and native-born Mexican-Americans—to fight for civil and economic equality. “*This is the time*,” he writes, “when the *Mexicanos* of today should begin to interest themselves in the reconquest of their lands and liberty.”<sup>25</sup> As Griswold del Castillo points out, the idea that the “revolution should motivate” Mexican-Americans “to organize and unite their communities” to fight for their civil rights was a recurrent theme.<sup>26</sup> *La crónica*’s commitment to the revolution’s ideals, then, became an important framework for the adaptation and negotiation of an ethnic identity, one predicated on ideas of rights and resistance.

At the same time, and like Magnón’s memoir, *La crónica*’s engagements with the revolution produced a nationalism that simultaneously placed border Mexicans at the center of the revolutionary project and thus attempted to reshape a Mexican national narrative that had rendered them either invisible or a threat to Mexican cultural and national integrity. Like many Mexicans who ended up north of the border,



the *letrados* of Laredo refused to be cut loose by the Mexican nationalist project, insisting on writing themselves into the story of the nation in ways that combined an emerging ethnic history with the larger history of US-Mexican relations. One finds this logic operating in the Idar quote referenced above, in which Idar uses the national project of the revolution to spur the Mexican-American fight for social justice, doing so through the language of “reconquest” and thus invoking the larger history of US imperial aggression against Mexico. Consequently, in fighting for their rights as ethnic subjects of the United States, Mexican-Americans would also be the protagonists in fighting to right a historical wrong between nations.

The Laredo *letrados* also strategically joined their histories to those of the Mexican migrant laborers who streamed into the United States as a result of the violence of the revolution. One consequence of the revolution was the migration of over 1 million Mexicans to the United States in pursuit of economic and social stability. For Texas Mexicans who lived along the border, the migrants who crossed the river were a daily reminder both of the failures of the revolutionary project and of the contempt with which many Anglo-Americans regarded the migrants. At the 1911 Primer Congreso Mexicano, a conference organized in Laredo by the publishers of *La crónica* in response to the heightened climate of violence and nativism faced by Texas Mexicans, a letter sent by one of the delegates addressed this issue: “Día a día se ve cruzar el Río Bravo por grandes grupos de mexicanos que ansiosos de mejor salario para el sostenimiento de la familia van a Texas, y si bien es cierto que consiguen comer y vestir mejor . . . también es cierto que con frecuencia son tratados con un vergonzoso desprecio de parte de los americanos tratandolos como a raza degenerada o oculta” (Day by day one sees large groups of Mexicans cross the Río Bravo and, anxious for a better salary with which to support their families, go to Texas, and if it is true that they attain better living conditions . . . it is also true that the Americans frequently treat them with shameful disregard, as if they were dealing with a degraded or hidden race).<sup>27</sup> It did not take long for the politically active *Tejanos*, deeply cognizant of the relationship between local conflicts and national projects, to place the everyday subjection of migrant laborers within the context of the history of US dominance over Mexico. Nicasio Idar’s son, Clemente, would do just that in an article that shows his bristling at the exploitation of Mexican workers to be rooted in a broader nationalist sensibility: “Texas-Mexicans have produced with the sweat of their brow the bountiful agricultural wealth known throughout the country, and in recompense for this they have been put to work as peones on the land of their forefathers.”<sup>28</sup> Such passages illustrate David Gutiérrez’s argument that Mexican-Americans have engaged in a constant process of defining and redefining themselves against more recent Mexican (im)migrants.<sup>29</sup> In this way, the increasing visibility of recent Mexican (im)migrants informed how the Laredo *letrados* conceptualized their identities as Mexican-Americans, especially as they tried to make sense of the relationship between the positions occupied by both groups in the United States.

Clemente Idar makes similar, though more explicit, connections. In a 1910 article in *La crónica*, he protests the segregation of and discrimination against Mexican students in the US education system:

Una completa aclaración de los hechos vendrá á demostrar, por una parte, que los mexicanos que hemos nacido en este país y á pesar de nuestra nacionalidad Americana, no disfrutamos en toda su extension de los privilegios y garantías que nos ofrece la Constitución Federal; y, por otra, que á los individuos netamente mexicanos, también se les niegan derechos y prerogativas que los Tratados de Guadalupe Hidalgo entre México y los Estados Unidos, mutuamente les concedieron, resultando, que mexicanos y méxico-americanos, estamos en igual situación. . . . Únicamente reclamamos un derecho. A los japoneses, á los irlandeses, á los escoceses, á los ingleses, á los italianos y á tantas otras razas que en grande afluencia inmigran á este país, no se les pone ninguna traba para que concurran á las escuelas públicas de todos los Estados de la República Americana. ¿Por qué se le pone al mexicano y al méxico-americano? . . . ¿Ya se olvidaron los tratados de Guadalupe Hidalgo?

[A complete clarification of the facts will prove on the one hand that we, the Mexicans born in this country, even though we have American citizenship, do not fully enjoy the privileges and guarantees that the Federal Constitution offers. On the other hand, it will prove that those individuals who are fully Mexican have also been denied privileges and prerogatives that the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo between Mexico and the United States mutually conceded. This results in the fact that Mexicans and Mexican-Americans are in the same situation. . . . We simply reclaim a right. Japanese, Irish, Scottish, English, Italians and other races that immigrate to this country in such a great number do not meet with any obstacles to attend public schools in any state of the American Republic. Why do the Mexican and the Mexican-American meet with these problems? . . . Did [American educators] already forget the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo?]<sup>30</sup>

Like his father Nicasio, Clemente Idar combines ethnic grievance with the history of Mexican imperial subjection in ways that position the border subject at the center of US-Mexico relations. Drawing parallels between the injustices endured by Mexican-Americans and newcomer Mexican (im)migrants, he highlights the interconnections between local and international conflicts, arguing that the second-class citizenship experienced by Mexican-Americans indicates the unequal power relations between Mexico and the United States. That inequality is repeatedly made manifest by the continuous waves of migrants who enter the United States and are denied their rights under the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, a situation that indicates disregard not only for the migrants themselves but also for the Mexican state. When Idar concludes that “Mexicans and Mexican-Americans are in the same situation,” he gestures toward a collapsing of the distinctions between them and suggests that all Mexicans in the United States, whether long or newly settled, citizen or not, act as an index of the US-Mexico relationship. Thus, in keeping with his father’s line of argument, Clemente ultimately claims that the fight for group rights is a fight to rectify Mexico’s neocolonial relation to the United States while

also suggesting that Mexican-Americans mark the continued unfolding of Mexican history north of the border.

Idar's intertwining of local, national, and international concerns demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of the inextricability of the plights of Mexican migrants from those of Mexican-Americans. For while they made up a variety of legal status categories in the United States, they tended to be lumped together in a single "outsider" category. The lack of differentiation imposed on Mexicans in the United States is a situation that Idar embraces in this instance, as he draws a parallel between the problems of Mexican-Americans and the disregard for the terms of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. His yoking together of local and international conflicts makes discrimination in US schooling policies reverberate with the history of US imperialism while positioning Mexican-American dispossession as central to that history, and as the basis for resistance. Moreover, juxtaposing these issues—whether in a single article or in an array of articles appearing side by side and page by page in *La crónica*—implicitly promotes a similarly transnational view of the revolution itself, as the linking of discrimination and violence against Mexican-Americans with the struggles of Mexican (im)migrants and the revolutionary upheaval causes all to become intertwined with and shaped by a long history of US domination.

Yet while Idar asserts the similarities of the situations faced by Mexican-Americans and Mexican (im)migrants, and insists on infusing his critiques of the issues that bind them with the history of imperial conquest, he does not lose sight of the local parameters of the nation-based projects that most immediately affect Mexican-Americans as subjects of the United States, in this case the project of citizenship. Here Idar dramatically shifts from considering Mexican-American history as international history, to situating that story within the classic American immigrant narrative, and then returning to the international perspective of military and diplomatic conflict with which he began. Consequently, he suggests that disrespect for the Mexican nation feeds discriminative practices against Mexican-Americans and that full inclusion into the national polity for the latter will be predicated on respect in the international arena for the former. One sees this in the plaintive end to his article, where, after commenting on the smooth entry of other immigrants into the US education system (and showing a clear lack of understanding of the hostilities faced by those groups), he wonders why Mexicans and Mexican-Americans face so many obstacles: "Did [American educators] already forget the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo?"

By examining these men and women of the border through the concept of the opposition *letrado*, I hope to make at least two broad critical interventions in the fields of Latin American studies, transnational American studies, and border studies. Generally speaking, US hemispheric scholarship has focused on US economic and political dominance in the hemisphere, resulting in an exciting body of work that has oriented American studies toward transnational analyses. However, that work has also been criticized from a Latin Americanist perspective because it tends to treat Latin America as little more than a recipient site of US policies and

aggressions.<sup>31</sup> By focusing on Mexican-American engagements with the revolution, I foreground Mexico's role as a protagonist in the story of Mexican-Americans, not simply as a victim of US aggression. Even more central to the story I am telling is the fact that Mexican-Americans were not simply acted on by these Mexican ideologies; on the contrary, they actively responded to the revolution, attempting to shape many of its most important political and social currents in ways that subsequently informed their struggles for social justice in the United States. In so doing, they asserted themselves as active agents in Mexican history even as they attempted to make lives for themselves north of the border. The concept of the *letrado* enables the recognition of their role as active agents not only within Mexican history but also within hemispheric history. Situating segments of Mexican-American culture in this way has implications for border studies, a field that rightly emphasizes Mexican-American cultural autonomy in the borderlands as well as the local conflicts that give rise to them. As invaluable as this focus on the local is, it can obscure the continuing persistence of state-national power in communities that are resistant toward national centers, while overlooking the relationships among local conflicts, national projects, and transnational currents. In this case, the Laredo *letrados'* responses to their local conditions as subjects of the United States were shaped by national projects emanating from both Mexico and the United States and were a local manifestation of a hemispheric movement of limited opposition. This approach allows for a continued examination of how Mexican-Americans have been excluded from the United States, but it adds a focus on how they operate as dynamic parts of multiple nations and of transnational phenomena.

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#### Acknowledgments

I thank Bianet Castellanos, Adriana Estill, Lourdes Gutiérrez Nájera, and Desirée Martín for reading and commenting on an earlier draft of this essay.

#### Notes

- 1 Magnón originally wrote her memoir in Spanish. When she could not find a publisher, she translated her account into English in the hope that a US press would publish it, but without success. Clara Lomas published the English version of *The Rebel* in 1994 and the

Spanish version in 2004. The English version of the quotation is from Lomas's introduction to *The Rebel*, xxxix. The Spanish is from Villegas de Magnón, *Le rebelde*, 52.

- 2 Kanellos, "Brief History," 100.

- 3 Among the many works that examine the role played by Mexicans in the United States in the Revolution, see Griswold del Castillo, "Mexican Revolution"; García, *Desert Immigrants*; Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans*; Zamora, *World*; Pérez, *Decolonial Imaginary*; Lomas, "Transborder Discourse"; and Marroquín

- Arredondo, Franco, and Mieri, *Open Borders to a Revolution*. For an engaging microhistory of the revolution in El Paso, Texas, see Romo, *Ringside Seat to a Revolution*.
- 4 Johnson, *Revolution in Texas*, 42. For more on the women of this circle, especially in terms of their roles as educators, see Enoch, *Refiguring Rhetorical Education*.
- 5 See Pratt, "Modernity and Periphery."
- 6 Paredes, *Texas-Mexican Cancionero*, xiv.
- 7 For example, the important edited collection *Sex in Revolution* focuses on gender yet mentions none of the dozens of *fronterizas* who actively engaged the war as writers and in other capacities. See Olcott, Vaughan, and Cano, *Sex in Revolution*.
- 8 Chasteen, Introduction, vii–viii.
- 9 Rama, *Lettered City*, 105 (hereafter cited as *LC*).
- 10 De la Campa, *Latin Americanism*, 132.
- 11 In describing the Mexican center, I borrow the term *centrifugal* from Leal, "Mexico's Centrifugal Culture," 111–12.
- 12 Lambright and Guerrero, *Unfolding the City*, xix.
- 13 I examine the gender dynamics of these borderlands *letrados* in my manuscript in progress, tentatively titled *Revolutionary Subjects: The Mexican Revolution and the Transnational Emergence of Mexican American Literature and Culture, 1910–1959*.
- 14 Vasconcelos, *Memorias*, 1:65.
- 15 Tiller, "George Santayana."
- 16 Zuñiga, "El norte de México"; Alonso, *Thread of Blood*, 18.
- 17 Tabuenca Córdoba, "Sketches of Identities," 498.
- 18 Skirius, "Vasconcelos."
- 19 Vasconcelos, *Memorias*, 1:554, quoted in Zuñiga, "El norte de México," 19.
- 20 Vasconcelos, *Memorias*, 1:31.
- 21 Vasconcelos, *Memorias*, 1:54.
- 22 Quoted in Lomas, Introduction, xli.
- 23 Griswold del Castillo, "Mexican Revolution," 44.
- 24 Griswold del Castillo, "Mexican Revolution," 46.
- 25 Quoted in Griswold del Castillo, "Mexican Revolution," 46. Italics mine.
- 26 Griswold del Castillo, "Mexican Revolution," 46.
- 27 Quoted in Limón, "El Primer Congreso Mexicanista de 1911," 96. My translation.
- 28 *La crónica*, "El león despierta," July 13, 1911, quoted in Zamora, *World*, 97.
- 29 Gutiérrez, *Walls and Mirrors*, 6.
- 30 Idar, "Tanto los niños Mexicanos." Jessica Enoch, from whom I quote the English translation (*Refiguring Rhetorical Education*, 139), attributes the translation to Raquel Moran Tellez and Malena Florin.
- 31 Sadowski-Smith and Fox, "Theorizing the Hemisphere," 7.
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